



# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### Saint Nicholas and German immigration to Alexandria

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*Image: A photo of 522-524 King St. the day before the buildings were demolished in the 1960s for urban renewal. Photo, Alexandria Archaeology*

**D**id you know that in Germany, Saint Nicholas visits children on Dec. 6, rather than Christmas Eve? You might wonder what that has to do with Alexandria's history. The answer is a lot, actually.

Other than the English and Scots, Germans were one of the largest immigrant groups that settled in Alexandria. While legends of Hessian prisoners-of-war from the Revolutionary War laying the cobblestones on Prince Street don't seem substantiated by documentary evidence, Germans did settle in Alexandria in significant numbers, first noticed by the census in 1850.

It seems that the sudden appearance of German immigrants to Alexandria was a result of the European revolutions of 1848. Indeed, the failure of the revolutions and the subsequent upheaval in the German-speaking states that later made up Germany – Germany wasn't formalized as a country until 1870 – accounts for the arrival of people such as Michael German.

German was a baker, who is recorded in the 1850 census as a tenant at 522-524 King St. Records show that he moved his business to the building in 1849 and stayed until 1852.

That year, he bought the building next door, 526 King St., and continued to live and run his bakery there at least until 1888.

German listed his birthplace as Bavaria, and so would likely have continued the tradition of placing gifts in children's boots or shoes on Dec. 6, especially since he was a member of Immanuel Lutheran Church. German's was one of many stories of financial success for immigrants in Alexandria, as he moved from a lowly tenant in 1849 to one of the richest residents by 1870, according to tax records.





## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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Later tenants at 522-524 King St. also arrived from Germany. In 1860, Lewis Baar, along with his wife and five children, rented the upper floors of the building and ran a dry goods store on the ground floor. They left in 1862, and another tenant from Germany leased that building.

This time it was David Bendheim, a German Jewish immigrant from Baaden, which is also in the southwestern part of today's Germany. If his last name is familiar to readers, it is probably because his grandson Leroy became the mayor of Alexandria in the 1950s, and afterward served in the Virginia State Senate.

David Bendheim's daughter Rachel married another immigrant from the current German state of Bavaria named Max Pretzfelder in 1882. The new couple rented retail space for their dry goods store and the upstairs residence of 528-530 King St. from German.

There are many more immigration stories from Germany that we could have highlighted. But the story of one building and its connections to a community gives us a glimpse into Alexandria in the 1850s.

Members of that community separated, primarily along religious fault lines, upon their arrival in Alexandria. Some maintained their former country's traditions and some not. This tension is represented by the Saint Nicholas tradition, where based on their religion, some arrivals from Germany participated, and presumably, others didn't.

*"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.*

*These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.*